OREGON ARTSWATCH

The sacred outcasts deserve support and protection: an interview with Demian DinéYazhi

"The blessings will test you" : Portland-based Diné transdisciplinary artist reflects on ancestry, survival, and their recent work on Fire Island.

By Gili Rappaport

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Visual Arts

On a warm August morning, Portland still heavy with summer's residue, I stood beneath the Burnside Bridge billboard: '*Long Live the Wildcards, Misfits & Dabblers*.' The words lingered like a chant, revealing pride, broken promises, and ironies. It was in that humming space that I spoke with Demian DinéYazhi´ (Naasht'ézhí Tábaahá [Zuni Clan Water's Edge] and Tódích´íi´nii [Bitter Water], clans of the Diné Tribe), a Portland-based Diné transdisciplinary artist whose work refuses the tidy boxes of colonial etiquette.

Demian's practice moves across forms—radiating neon signs, letterpress posters, self-published books with BIPOC communities, endurance performances, and sonic interventions—always unsettling the remnants of settler colonial conditioning infecting the body.

Born in Gallup, New Mexico, a bordertown entangled with the commodification of Native art, DinéYazhi´ grew up questioning what it meant to create work rooted in Diné traditions outside settler frameworks. In 2014, they received their BFA in Intermedia Arts from PNCA, where an ongoing conflict with the "art school industrial complex" emerged. They describe their work as Radical Indigenous Queer Feminist ideology: both refusal and ceremony, carrying ancestral traditions of Survivance, migration, and revolutionary care forward.

Demian's work has traveled widely—recently to the Honolulu Biennial, the Biennale of Sydney, the 2024 Whitney Biennial, where a neon sign glitched with the hidden message FREE PALESTINE, and to the BOFFO Residency on Fire Island in NYC this August (2025), where banners proclaiming Stolen + Colonized / Sacred + Ancestral / UNKECHAUG LAND stretched across luxury homes and along the shore. That project, AN INFECTED SUNSET, revisited a poem DinéYazhi´ first performed in 2018, critiquing the limits of the homonormative, cis white queer culture at the site while honoring radical queer histories. I've long been humbled by the energy of 2SLBGTQAI+ beach communities myself, co-organizing the revival of Ralph's Beach Parties since 2022, when Ralph Hopkins, Halo Perez-Gallardo, and I brought Ralph's iconic, historic fashion show parties back to Riis Beach after a twenty year hiatus, a beloved NYC gay beach destination on the southernmost tip of Queens.

What follows is our conversation, held just days after Demian's Fire Island performance.

Image: Demian DinéYazhi', *AN INFECTED SUNSET* (banner reads: Stolen + Colonized Sacred + Ancestral UNKECHAUG LAND), 2025, BOFFO Residency, Photo by Lucas Ondak (@lucas_ondak).

Gili Rappaport: Thinking back to New Mexico and your Diné clans, how do these lineages guide your work?

Demian DinéYazhi´: I recently went to SWAIA (Santa Fe Indian Market). Non-Native collectors buy Indigenous work, supporting artists, but very few from the rez can participate in these capitalist-imposed systems. Colonial institutions mediate these transactions—they are extractive. No one wants to have that conversation. Why is that? Or how, in 2020, when qualified BIPOC were put in positions of power to "reckon with racist histories," yet these

systems haven't changed, and many were replaced or terminated without resolving structural issues.

Growing up in Gallup, seeing how Indigenous art was framed, I questioned what it meant to be an artist from my own community. Though my practice doesn't use traditional crafts like weaving or jewelry, my work is deeply immersed in Diné traditions—ceremony, creation stories, matriarchal guidance—and honors that lineage, even within spaces that extract and appropriate Indigenous concepts.

Gili Rappaport: What is the tension between honoring and extraction?

Demian DinéYazhi´: I became empowered through queer, feminist, and punk subcultures, then realized I was already surrounded by matriarchs and DIY aesthetics in my family. My work emerged from higher education conflicts—the "art school industrial complex" at PNCA—where Indigenous representation was nearly nonexistent. One of my first museum exhibitions was at Portland Art Museum CCNA (2015). I drove dirt from my maternal grandparents' land and coal purchased on the roadside to honor ceremony, migration, and the Code Talkers. For Diné, we are the strongest and most connected to the sacred harmony of the cosmos when we are within our four sacred mountains. I was exploring how we move in and out of sacred spaces and maintain that connection. However, the museum required everything inside to die for the work to be installed—a metaphor for how colonial institutions desecrate Indigenous land.

Image: Demian DinéYazhi', Shown on right (from left to right): *KA-HA-TENI KAY-YAH, Native (Native) Land (Land); and KAY-YAH CAH-DA-KHI TA-GAID AH-CHANH, Land (Land) Wound (Wound) Without (Without) Self Defense (Protect)*; 2016; Portland Art Museum CCNA.

Gili Rappaport: How do these histories inform *AN INFECTED SUNSET* on Fire Island (BOFFO, 2025)?

Demian DinéYazhi´: It was important for me to revisit my 2018 poem: *AN INFECTED SUNSET*. It critiques the limits of homonormative, cis white queer culture while honoring radical queer histories. Performing the poem requires commitment and endurance—no breaks, no water. The accompanying banners acknowledge stolen land and ancestral cosmic energy. Fire Island's colonial history is under-documented; the banners disrupted rows of expensive homes, occupation, and reminded people of the land's ancestral and cosmic significance. Earth itself—magma, uranium, coal—is beautiful, complex, and took unimaginable centuries to harmonize.

Image: Demian DinéYazhi', *AN INFECTED SUNSET*, 2025, BOFFO, Photo by Oscar Diaz (@oscmdiaz).

Gili Rappaport: How can joy, prayer, and ancestral energy confront colonialism and systemic violence?

Demian DinéYazhi´: Colonialism is disharmonious, but Indigenous resiliency reminds us of miracles. My work is for Indigenous, queer, trans, non-binary people, and the "sacred outcasts" demanding blessed, harmonious paths aimed toward liberation. Indigenous communities face conservatism, forced assimilation, predatory religions, yet we persist due to centuries of care, stewardship, and resistance. That resistance is a ceremonial offering reminding us that liberation is essential for our communities and breaking the curse embedded in colonial systems.

Gili Rappaport: How has Portland shaped your practice?

Demian DinéYazhi´: Riot Grrrl, Queer culture, and an abundance of water, mountains, and flora appealed to me when I first moved here. Portland is an imperfect colonial city that can be alienating and racist, but DIY spaces and collaborators like Louis Chavez and Sharita Towne, pop-ups like Gabe Flores' Place at Pioneer Place Mall and Surplus Space, and Bronco Gallery (2009–2015) shaped me. Institutional support is minimal; thankfully Mullowney Printing has been a steadfast collaborator, as well as Stephanie Snyder.

Image: Demian DinéYazhi' with Louis Chávez, *Untitled (We Is O.K.)*, 2012 with photos from 2025, included in 'The End of Nature' at Gerald Peters Contemporary (August 14–October 4, 2025). Courtesy of Demian DinéYazhi'.

Gili Rappaport: What support do you need?

Demian DinéYazhi´: Institutions prioritizing local artists, avoiding funders tied to genocidal systems, and compensating artists consulting on equity. Unrestricted support to non-represented artists and assistance to stable housing, healthcare, retirement, and materials.

Gili Rappaport: What are your priorities as an artist?

Demian DinéYazhi´: To create work for the community, not institutions. BOFFO gave trust, care, and resources, which reignited my desire to collaborate, revisit older work, abandon the need to respond to colonial institutions, and reconsider beauty in my work.

Gili Rappaport: Were there surprises in the work?

Demian DinéYazhi´: On Fire Island, a 25-foot banner I painted got ruined by the wind and spilled ink. It reminded me that the blessings will test you. The final work, raw and simple, created poetry on its own terms.

Gili Rappaport: Next projects?

Demian DinéYazhi´: Collaboration, revisiting older practices, a second edition of *AN INFECTED SUNSET*, and another book. Non-binary, trans, and queer youth need subversive spaces—DIY autonomy, zines, records—outside the algorithm. Empowering them to trust themselves and remain critical of systems is urgent.

Image: Demian DinéYazhi', *AN INFECTED SUNSET*, 2025, BOFFO, Photo by Oscar Diaz (@oscmdiaz)

Gili Rappaport is an artist, writer, herbalist, and body worker. They have shared work at The Kitchen, Printed Matter, and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and co-authored They Call Me The Mayor at Riis Beach: Ralph's Beach Parties 1994—2000 (Anthology Editions, 2024). They are Lead Instructor for the Amber Hollibaugh Seminar in the City, Queer Economies of Care (CUNY CLAGS/Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2025-2026), and an upcoming artist-in-residence at Sitka Center For Art & Ecology (2026). RACC (Regional Arts & Culture Council), Ford Family Foundation Golden Spot Residency for Oregon Visual Artists, and Portland Parks & Rec recently supported their work. Of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, Gili is devoted to learning to live in reciprocity with the land. www.gilian.space.

Conversation

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